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*Bureau of Consular Affairs*

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# Travel Tips for Older Americans

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# Travel Tips for Older Americans

International travel can be a rich and rewarding adventure. Whether you have waited a lifetime to take the perfect trip or are an experienced world traveler, we would like to offer some advice to help you plan a safe and healthy trip.

American consuls at U.S. embassies and consulates abroad are there to help if you encounter serious difficulties in your travels. They are happy to meet you if you come in to register your passport at the consular section of the U.S. embassy or consulate. But it is also their duty to assist American citizens abroad in times of emergency—at hospitals or police stations, for instance. This pamphlet is written in the hopes that it will help you to prevent such emergencies from arising.

## Preparation for Your Trip

**Start Early.** Apply for your passport as soon as possible. Three months before your departure date should give you plenty of time. See the section "Passports and Visas" on page 6 for details on how to apply.

**Learn About the Countries You Plan to Visit.** The countries you visit will seem like old friends if, before you go, you read up on their culture, people, and history. Bookstores and libraries are good resources. Travel magazines and the travel sections of major newspapers tell about places to visit and also give advice on everything from discount airfares to international health insurance. Many travel agents and foreign tourist bureaus provide free information on travel abroad.

**Travel Advisories.** The Department of State issues travel advisories concerning serious health or security conditions that may affect U.S. citizens. If you are traveling to an area where there may be problems, you may contact the nearest U.S. passport agency or the Department of State's Citizens Emergency Center on (202) 647–5225 to learn whether there are travel advisories in effect for the countries you plan to visit.

**Charter Flights.** Before you pay for a charter flight or travel package, read your contract carefully and see what guarantee it gives that the company will deliver the services that it is trying to sell you. Tour operators sometimes go out of business in the middle of a season, leaving passengers stranded, holding unusable return tickets and unable to obtain a refund for the unused portion of their trip. Unless you are certain a company is reputable, check its credentials with your local Better Business Bureau (BBB). The BBB maintains complaint files for a year. You can also check with the consumer affairs office of the American Society of Travel Agents, 1101 King Street, Alexandria, VA 22314, tel. (703) 739–2782 to learn if a travel company has a complaint record.

**Trip Insurance.** One sure way to ruin a vacation is to lose money because an emergency forces you to postpone or cancel your trip. Except for tickets on regularly scheduled airlines, almost any travel package you purchase will have a penalty for cancellation, and some companies will give no refund at all. Regularly scheduled airlines usually give a refund if an illness or death in the family forces you to cancel. They require a note from the doctor or a death certificate. Take careful note of the cancellation penalty for any other large travel purchase you make, such as a tour package, charter flight, or cruise. If you invest in trip insurance, make sure your policy covers all reasonable possibilities for your having to cancel. For instance, if an emergency with a family member would force you to cancel, insure against that as well.

Some trip insurance policies will also give a refund if the company goes out of business or otherwise does not make good on its offering. The best insurance against company default is to choose a reputable company that guarantees a refund if they do not deliver the goods. If, however, you are tempted to purchase a tour at a great bargain price and you can't find a guarantee of delivery in the fine print, protect yourself by purchasing trip insurance that covers company default.

Shop around for the trip insurance policy that offers the most benefits. Some credit card and traveler's check

companies offer travel protection packages for an additional fee. Benefits may even include accident and illness coverage while traveling.

**Health Insurance.** The Social Security Medicare program does not provide for payment of hospital or medical services obtained outside the U.S. However, some Medicare supplement plans offer foreign medical care coverage at no extra cost for treatments considered eligible under Medicare. These are reimbursement plans. You must pay the bills first and obtain receipts in order to submit them later for compensation. Many of these plans have a dollar ceiling per trip.

Review your health insurance policy. Obtaining medical treatment and hospital care abroad can be expensive. If your Medicare supplement or other medical insurance does not provide protection while traveling outside the United States, we strongly urge you to buy coverage that does. There are short-term health and emergency assistance policies called medical assistance programs that are designed specifically for travelers.

**Medical Assistance Programs.** One strong advantage of medical assistance programs is that they also cover the exorbitant cost of medical evacuation in the event of an accident or serious illness. As part of the coverage, these companies usually offer emergency consultation by telephone. They may refer you to the nearest hospital or call directly for help for you. If you need an interpreter, they may translate your instructions to a health care worker on the scene. Another benefit that is normally part of such coverage is payment for the return of remains to the United States in case of death.

If your regular health insurance already covers you for medical expenses abroad, you can buy a medical assistance program that offers all the consultative and evacuation services listed above, except for the health insurance itself. The cost of medical assistance coverage can be as low as $25 for a 2-week trip without health insurance coverage or $49 for the complete medical assistance program, including health insurance. Without this insurance medical evacuation can cost thousands of dollars.

If your travel agent cannot direct you to a medical assistance company, look for information on such services in travel magazines. Once you have adequate coverage, carry your insurance policy identity cards and claim forms with you when you travel.

**Medication.** If you require medication, bring an ample supply in its original containers. Because of strict laws concerning narcotics throughout the world, bring along copies of your prescriptions and, if you have an unusual prescription, carry a letter from your physician explaining your need for the drug. As an extra precaution, carry the generic names of your medications with you, because pharmaceutical companies overseas may use different names from those used in the United States.

If you wear eyeglasses, take an extra pair with you. Pack medicines and extra eyeglasses in your hand luggage so they will be available in case your checked luggage is lost. To be extra secure, pack a backup supply of medicines and a third pair of eyeglasses in your checked luggage. If you have allergies, reactions to certain medications, foods, or insect bites, or other unique medical problems, consider wearing a "medical alert" bracelet. You may also wish to carry a letter from your physician explaining desired treatment should you become ill.

**Immunizations.** Information on immunizations and health precautions for travelers can be obtained from local health departments, the U.S. Public Health Service, private doctors, or travel clinics. General guidance can also be found in the U.S. Public Health Service book *Health Information for International Travel*. To order this book, see page 12.

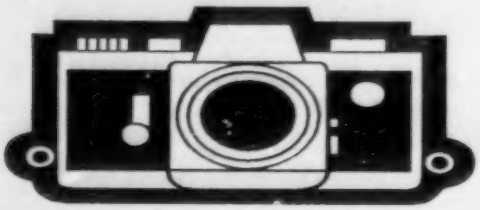
**Passport.** Pack an "emergency kit" to help you get a replacement passport in case yours is lost or stolen. To make a kit, photocopy the data page at the front of your passport; write down the addresses and telephone numbers of the U.S. embassies and consulates in the countries you plan to visit; and put this information, along with two passport-sized photographs, in a place separate from your passport.

**Leave a Detailed Itinerary.** Give a friend or relative your travel schedule. Include names, addresses, and telephone numbers of persons and places to be visited; your passport

number and the date and place it was issued; and credit card, traveler's check, and airline ticket numbers. Keep a copy of this information for yourself in a separate place from your purse or wallet. If you change your travel plans—for example, if you miss your return flight to the United States or extend your trip—be sure to notify relatives or friends at home.

**Don't Overprogram.** Allow time to relax and really enjoy yourself. Even if this is your once-in-a-lifetime trip, don't feel you have to fill every available minute.

If you are visiting a country such as China, where physical activity can be quite strenuous and sudden changes in diet and climate can have serious health consequences for the unprepared traveler, consult your physician before you depart.



**What to Pack.** Carefully consider the clothing you take. Don't pack more than you need and end up lugging around heavy suitcases. Wash-and-wear clothing and sturdy walking shoes are good ideas. Consider the climate and season in the countries you will visit and bring an extra outfit for unexpectedly warm or cool weather. A sweater or shawl is always useful for cooler evenings and air-conditioned planes and hotels. Dress conservatively—a wardrobe that is flashy or too causal may attract the attention of thieves or con artists.

Include a change of clothing in your carry-on luggage. Otherwise, if your bags are lost, you could be wearing the same clothes you were traveling in during the entire time it takes to locate your luggage—an average of 72 hours.

Do not pack anything that you would hate to lose, such as valuable jewelry, family photographs, or objects of sentimental value.

## Passports and Visas

**Passports.** It is a good idea to apply 3 months before you plan to travel. If you also need visas, allow more time, as you must have a valid passport before applying for a visa. If this is your first passport, you must apply in person, bringing with you proof of U.S. citizenship (usually a certified copy of your birth certificate, a naturalization certificate, or a consular report of birth abroad); two identical recent front-view photos (2" x 2"); a completed passport application (Form DSP–11); proof of identity, such as a valid driver's license or other photo or physical-description I.D.; and the fee of $42 for a passport valid for 10 years.

You may apply at any passport agency (see list at the end of this pamphlet) or at one of the many clerks of court or post offices designated to accept passport applications. Your birth certificate or other documents will be returned to you by mail, along with your new passport.

You may be eligible to apply for a passport by mail. If you have had a full-validity passport issued within the past 12 years and you are able to mail the passport with your application, you can use Form DSP–82, "Application for Passport by Mail," to apply. Obtain this form from any office that accepts passport applications or from your travel agent. Follow the instructions on the back of the form. The renewal passport fee is $35.

When you receive your passport, be sure to sign it on page 1 and to pencil in on page 4 the requested information. This will help us notify your family or friends in case of an accident or other emergency. Do not designate your traveling companion as the person to be notified in case of an emergency.

**Visas.** Many countries require a visa—an endorsement or stamp placed in your passport by a foreign government—that permits you to visit that country for a specified purpose and a limited time. Many countries require you to obtain a visa from their consular office nearest to your residence. The addresses of foreign consular offices can be found in telephone directories of large cities or in the *Congressional Directory*, available in most libraries; or you may write or

call the appropriate embassy in Washington, D.C. Apply for your visa directly to the embassy or consulate of each country you plan to visit or ask your travel agent to assist you with visas. U.S. passport agencies cannot obtain visas for you. For more information on visas, you may order the publication *Foreign Entry Requirements*. See page 13.

An increasing number of countries are establishing entry requirements regarding AIDS testing, particularly for long-term residents and students. Check with the embassy or consulate of the countries you plan to visit for the latest information.

## Money and Valuables

**Don't Take Your Money in Cash.** Bring most of your money in traveler's checks. Have a reasonable amount of cash with you, but not more than you will need for a day or two. Convert your traveler's checks to local currency as you use them rather than all at once.

You may also wish to bring at least one internationally recognized credit card. Before you leave, find out what your credit card limit is and do not exceed it. In some countries, travelers who have innocently exceeded their limit have been arrested for fraud. Leave unneeded credit cards at home.

If you must take jewelry or other valuables, use hotel security vaults to store them. It is wise to register such items with U.S. Customs before leaving the United States to make customs processing easier when you return.

It is a violation of law in some countries to enter or exit with that country's currency. Check with a travel agent or the embassy or consulate of the countries you plan to visit to learn their currency restrictions. Before departing from the U.S., you may wish, if allowed, to purchase small amounts of foreign currency and coins to use for buses, taxis, telephone calls, and other incidentals when you first arrive in a country. You may purchase foreign currency from some banks or from foreign exchange dealers. Most international airports also have money exchange facilities.

Once you are abroad, local banks generally give more favorable rates of exchange than hotels, restaurants, or stores for converting your U.S. dollars and traveler's checks into foreign currency.

## Your Trip

**Driving.** U.S. auto insurance is usually not valid outside of the United States and Canada. When you drive in any other country, be sure to buy adequate auto insurance in that country. When renting a car abroad, make certain that adequate insurance is part of your contract; otherwise, purchase additional coverage in an amount similar to that which you carry at home.

**Flying.** On long flights, break up long periods of sitting. Leave your seat from time to time and also do in-place exercises. This will help prevent your arriving tired and stiff-jointed. Also, get some exercise after a long flight. For example, take a walk or use your hotel's exercise room.

**Reconfirm.** Upon arrival at each stopover, reconfirm your onward reservations. When possible, obtain a written confirmation. International flights generally require confirmation 72 hours in advance. If your name does not appear on the reservation list, you could find yourself stranded.

**Register.** If you plan to be in a location for 2 weeks or more or in an area where there is civil unrest or any other emergency situation, register with the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate. This will help in locating you, should someone in the United States wish to confirm your safety and welfare or need to contact you urgently.

## Practical Safety Tips

**Respect the Local Laws and Customs.** While abroad, you are subject to the laws and regulations of your host country and are not protected by the U.S. Constitution. If you should be detained by local authorities, ask to talk to a U.S. consular officer. Under international agreements and practice, you have a right to contact an American consul. Although U.S. consuls cannot act as your attorney or get you out of jail, they can provide you with a list of local attorneys and inform you of your rights under local laws. They will also monitor the status of detained Americans and make sure they are treated fairly under local laws.

**Guard Your Passport.** Your passport is the most valuable document you carry abroad. It confirms that you are an American citizen. Do not carry your passport in the same place as your money, use it as collateral for a loan, or pack it in your luggage. Remember to keep your passport number in a separate location in case it is lost or stolen. In some countries, you may be required to leave your passport overnight or for several days with the hotel management. This may be local practice—do not be concerned unless the passport is not returned as promised. If your passport is lost or stolen abroad, immediately report it to the local police; obtain a copy of the report; and contact the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate to apply for a new passport.

**Be Alert.** Move purposefully and confidently. If you should find yourself in a crowded area, such as in an elevator, subway, marketplace, or at a parade, exercise special caution to avoid theft.

**Robbery.** Help prevent theft by carrying your belongings securely. Carry purses tucked under an arm and not dangling by a strap. Carry valuables in an inside front pocket or in a money belt, not in a hip pocket. You may wish

to wrap your wallet with rubber bands to make it more difficult for someone to slip it from your pocket unnoticed. Money belts or pouches that fit around your shoulder or waist are available through travel magazines and at some luggage shops and department stores.

## Assistance From U.S. Embassies and Consulates

**Emergencies.** If you encounter serious legal, medical, or financial difficulties or other problems abroad, contact the nearest U.S. embassy or consulate for assistance. Although, as mentioned above, consular officers cannot serve as attorneys, they can help you find legal assistance. Consular officers cannot cash checks, lend money, or act as travel agents. However, in an emergency, they can help you get in touch with your family back home to inform them on how to wire funds to you and to let them know of your situation. They can also provide you with the latest travel advisories to alert you to adverse conditions abroad.

**Nonemergencies.** Consular officers can also provide nonemergency services such as information on absentee voting and acquisition or loss of U.S. citizenship. They can arrange for the transfer of Social Security and other benefits to Americans residing abroad, provide U.S. tax forms, notarize documents, and advise U.S. citizens on property claims.

**Safeguarding Your Health.** If you are injured or become seriously ill abroad, a U.S. consular officer will assist you in finding a physician or other medical services, and, with your permission, will inform your family members or friends of your condition. If needed, consular officers can assist your family in transferring money to the foreign country to pay for your treatment.

**Death Abroad.** Each year, about 6,000 Americans die abroad. Two-thirds of them are Americans who live overseas, but approximately 2,000 Americans per year die while traveling abroad. Consular officers will contact the next of kin in the United States and will explain the local requirements. It is a worthwhile precaution to have insurance that

covers the cost of local burial or shipment of remains home to the United States (see information on medical assistance programs on page 3). Otherwise, this cost must be borne by next of kin and can be extremely expensive. The U.S. Government cannot pay for shipment of remains to the United States.

## Shopping—Some Things To Avoid

Beware of purchasing souvenirs made from endangered wildlife. Much wildlife and wildlife products are prohibited either by U.S. or foreign laws from import into the United States. You risk confiscation and a possible fine if you attempt to import such things. Watch out for and avoid purchasing the following prohibited items:

- All products made from sea turtles.
- All ivory, both Asian and African.
- Furs from spotted cats.
- Furs from marine mammals.
- Feathers and feather products from wild birds.
- All live or stuffed birds from Australia, Brazil, Columbia, Costa Rica, Ecuador, Guatemala, Mexico, Paraguay, Venezuela, and some Caribbean countries.
- Most crocodile and caiman leather.
- Most coral, whether in chunks or in jewelry.

## When You Return

**Be Prepared.** On arrival in the United States, have your passport ready when you go through immigration and customs controls.

Keep receipts for any items you purchased abroad. U.S. citizens may bring back and orally declare $400 worth of merchandise duty free. The next $1,000 is taxed at a flat rate of 10%. Check with U.S. Customs for further information.

**Currency.** There is no limit on the amount of money or negotiable instruments which can be brought into or taken out of the United States. However, any amount over $10,000

must be reported to U.S. Customs on Customs Form 4790 when you depart from or enter into the United States.

Don't bring home any fresh fruits or vegetables. Such items will be confiscated.

## Useful Travel Publications

For the official word on immunizations, customs, and what you can legally bring into the United States, you may order one of the following U.S. Government publications:

*Health Information for International Travel* is a comprehensive listing of immunization requirements of foreign governments. In addition, it gives the U.S. Public Health Service's recommendations on immunizations and other health precautions for the international traveler. Copies are available for $4.75 from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402; tel. (202) 783–3238.

*Know Before You Go, Customs Hints for Returning U.S. Residents* gives detailed information on U.S. Customs regulations, including duty rates. Single copies are available free from any local customs office or by writing to the Department of the Treasury, U.S. Customs Service, P.O. Box 7407, Washington, D.C. 20044.

*Travelers Tips on Bringing Food, Plant, and Animal Products Into the United States* lists the regulations on bringing these items into the United States from most parts of the world. Fresh fruits and vegetables, meat, potted plants, pet birds, and other items are prohibited or restricted. Obtain the publication free from the Animal and Plant Health Inspection Service, U.S. Department of Agriculture, 732 Federal Bldg., 6505 Belcrest Road, Hyattsville, Maryland 20782.

The following publication is prepared by the World Wildlife Fund:

*Buyer Beware!* tells about restrictions on importing wildlife and wildlife products. For a free copy, write to the Publications Unit, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240; (202) 343–5634.

The following three publications from the Department of State may be ordered for $1 each from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402; tel. (202) 783–3238:

*Your Trip Abroad* provides basic travel information — tips on passports, visas, immunizations, and more. It will help you prepare for your trip and make it as trouble-free as possible.

*A Safe Trip Abroad* gives travel security advice for any traveler, but particularly for those who plan trips to areas of high crime or terrorism.

*Tips for Americans Residing Abroad* is prepared for the more than 2 million Americans who live in foreign countries.

The following three publications are also from the Department of State (see ordering information below):

*Foreign Entry Requirements* lists visa and other entry requirements of foreign countries and tells you how to apply for visas and tourist cards. Order this publication for 50¢ from the Consumer Information Center, Dept. 438T, Pueblo, CO 81009.

*Key Officers of Foreign Service Posts* gives addresses and telephone, telex, and FAX numbers for all U.S. embassies and consulates abroad. (NOTE: When writing to a U.S. embassy or consulate, address the envelope to the appropriate section, such as Consular Section, rather than to a specific individual.) This publication is updated 3 times a year and may be purchased from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402; tel. (202) 783–3238.

*Background Notes* are brief, factual pamphlets on each of 170 countries. They give current information on each country's people, culture, geography, history, government, economy, and political conditions. They also include a factual profile, brief travel notes, a country map, and a suggested reading list. For information on their price and to order copies, contact: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C. 20402; tel. (202) 783–3238.

# Passport Agencies

## Apply Early for Your Passport

**Boston Passport Agency**
Thomas P. O'Neill Federal Building, Room 247
10 Causeway Street
Boston, Massachusetts 02222
*Recording: 617–565–6998
Public Inquiries: 617–565–6990

**Chicago Passport Agency**
Kluczynski Federal Building, Suite 380
230 South Dearborn Street
Chicago, Illinois 60604–1564
*Recording: 312–353–5426
Public Inquiries: 312–353–7155 or 7163

**Honolulu Passport Agency**
New Federal Building, Room C–106
300 Ala Moana Boulevard
Honolulu, Hawaii 96850
*Recording: 808–541–1919
Public Inquiries: 808–541–1918

**Houston Passport Agency**
Concord Towers
1919 Smith Street, Suite 1100
Houston, Texas 77002
*Recording: 713–653–3159
Public Inquiries: 713–653–3153

**Los Angeles Passport Agency**
11000 Wilshire Boulevard, Room 13100
Los Angeles, California 90024–3615
*Recording: 213–209–7070
Public Inquiries: 213–209–7075

**Miami Passport Agency**
Federal Office Building, 16th Floor
51 Southwest First Avenue
Miami, Florida 33130–1680
*Recording: 305–536–5395 (English)
305–536–4448 (Spanish)
Public Inquiries: 305–536–4681

New Orleans Passport Agency
Postal Services Building, Room T–12005
701 Loyola Avenue
New Orleans, Louisiana 70113–1931
*Recording: 504–589–6728
Public Inquiries: 504–589–6161

New York Passport Agency
Rockefeller Center, Room 270
630 Fifth Avenue
New York, New York 10111–0031
*Recording: 212–541–7700
Public Inquiries: 212–541–7710

Philadelphia Passport Agency
Federal Office Building, Room 4426
600 Arch Street
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19106–1684
*Recording: 215–597–7482
Public Inquiries: 215–597–7480

San Francisco Passport Agency
525 Market Street, Suite 200
San Francisco, California 94105–2773
*Recording: 415–974–7972
Public Inquiries: 415–974–9941

Seattle Passport Agency
Federal Office Building, Room 992
915 Second Avenue
Seattle, Washington 98174–1091
*Recording: 206–442–7941
Public Inquiries: 206–442–7945

Stamford Passport Agency
One Landmark Square
Broad and Atlantic Streets
Stamford, Connecticut 06901–2767
*Recording: 203–325–4401
Public Inquiries: 203–325–3538 or 3530

Washington Passport Agency
1425 K Street, N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20524–0002
*Recording: 202–647–0518
Public Inquiries (M–F 8 a.m.–4:45 p.m. EST): 202–647–0518

*The twenty-four hour recording includes general passport information, passport agency location, and hours of operation.

# Where Do You Plan To Go Next?

The following area or country pamphlets may be ordered for $1 each from the Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Washington, DC 20402; tel. (202) 783–3238:

- *Tips for Travelers to Sub-Saharan Africa*
- *Tips for Travelers to the Caribbean*
- *Tips for Travelers to Central and South America*
- *Tips for Travelers to the People's Republic of China*
- *Tips for Travelers to Cuba*
- *Tips for Travelers to Eastern Europe and Yugoslavia*
- *Tips for Travelers to Mexico*
- *Tips for Travelers to the Middle East and North Africa*
- *Tips for Travelers to South Asia*
- *Tips for Travelers to the USSR*